The young Latin American people of the Cold War

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Memory, documentaries, politics of representation, critical ethnography and art in coping with civil war repercussions

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Introduction

This practice based research study takes a critical memory approach, on the role of documentary production for ethnographic research in post-civil war testimonies, and the politics of representation in Central America during the 80's and today. Researching the memory of those Guatemalans who lived and suffered the impact of the civil war, and how they coped with its repercussions. Examining 'the subjective act of remembering' through the case of the Guatemalan artist, filmmaker and activist Ana Lucía Cuevas.

Latin America in the Cold War narrative

The politics of representation during the Cold War shaped a Manichean narrative of confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States of America, a narrative which continues to permeate worldwide throughout society and influence political perceptions 'as varied as decolonisation, European integration, domestic politics, science and technology, and mass culture' (Harmer, 2014). This research will explore, through critical ethnography of memory and documentary, the testimonies of Guatemalans who lived and suffered the impact of the civil war. How did they cope with its repercussions and how do they represent themselves nowadays? This paper will contribute to the understanding of the impact of memory and representation in documentary film, where 'memories are not invoked for their own sake but are used to secure more equitable sociable relations based on the principle of justice '(Sanz Sabido, 2018). The segment of the documentary in progress: *'Lucía and Guatemala',* presented at the 'CCCU PGRA 2020 Conference', is part of practice-based research original footage.

The Cold War provided terrible and real images of violence that filled screens and radios around the world for decades, dictated by 'two antagonistic ways of modernity' (Westad in Pettinà) that, along with a Manichaean discourse, found fertile terrain in the Third World. Many of the problems that triggered social movements in Latin America did not take shape during, or because of the Cold

War, but were a legacy from the colonial system and the Republic, where an "Anti-Americanism" feeling dated back to Bolívar, 'expressed as an aversion to US materialism and individualism' (Brands 2010, p.12). Nevertheless the governments of Truman and Eisenhower (1952-1953) supported the Bolivian MNR's revolution, which also counted on the approval of the Communist Party, and included an Agrarian Reform and Nationalisation of Mines, but did not gravitate towards Moscow. Although in Guatemala, the US crushed the initiative of an agrarian reform (initiated against the interests of the Guatemalan elite and the United Fruit Company and promoted by the government of Jacobo Arbenz), mostly because of (an alleged) drift towards Moscow (Brands, 2016, p.16). With this information in mind, it is possible to show that the Cold War architects took advantage of, and appropriated, a certain social discourse to protect their own interests and impose their agenda. Although the Cold War heavily influenced politics in Latin America, '…its history is still waiting to be written' (Harmer in Pettinà, 2018, p.23). In the same way, the history of Guatemala, the third-largest country in Central America, still needs to be revised, considering the memories and points of view of Guatemalans, that do not appear registered in the official history. Hence the importance of the testimonies of young Latin American people, whose lives were changed by political factors during the 1980s in Guatemala.

That decade of the 1980s in Latin America was marked by political struggle. Military governments were prevalent in the continent and democracy would not return until the end of the 1980s. From 1978 to 1983, Guatemala suffered the cruellest chapter of its 36-year civil war, the coda of which was known as *la violencia (*the violence), a period of confrontation between military and guerrilla forces. From the military's point of view, it was 'a battle against Communism, against an armed and dangerous menace within. Whereas the guerrillas extended and unified their operations through an umbrella movement known as the Unidad Revolucionaria National Guatemalteca, URNG' (Warren, 2018, p.25). In 1983, the 'scorched earth plan', introduced by the governments of President General Romeo Lucas García and the *de facto* President General Efraín Ríos Montt, arbitrarily ordered, among other atrocities, the burning of more than 440 Maya indigenous villages, a genocide which is

widely documented (Jonas, 2013). But what are the memories of the young urban Guatemalans who experienced the civil war and *la violencia*? Many of them became opponents of the regime, committed activists or guerrilla fighters, while others fled into exile. The filmmaker Otto Gaytán, a then student, described how the *Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala* was considered a focus of dissent, suffering drastic restrictions. "*La policia se metía cuando querían (*The police get in, the university, when they wanted)" Gaytán recounts, there was intellectual persecution of lecturers and students, who were monitored, intimidated and in the worst cases disappeared. These brought about a terrible academic loss, making the 1980s *la década perdida* – the lost decade (personal communication with Miralles Terán, 2020). Ana Lucía recalls in the footage of *'Lucía and Guatemala'*: "My father had a well-defined political position. He was the Guatemalan University Chancellor, and his position was democratic. We had a very repressive military government and, as a consequence, our entire family was repressed. They [the military] came to raid our home. The military came from time to time and they left the house in a state of chaos. They followed us and we were under surveillance. We received many written and telephone threats. They called to warned us: 'Stop saying what you are saying' and those were the environment and conditions we lived through."

In 1985, during the military government of General Óscar Humberto Mejía Victores, a university student leader Carlos Cuevas went missing: "My brother Carlos, who was 24 years old at the time and was a member of the opposition, was captured and we never heard knew anything of him again" (Cuevas, 2019). Details of his kidnapping, torture and murder by agents of the government were discovered more than 20 years later in the National Police Archives. Carlos' wife, Rosario Godoy de Cuevas, founding member of the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM-Group of Mutual Support) for relatives of the disappeared, fell victim to the regime while trying to find him. She was also kidnapped, tortured and killed, along with her two-year-old son and her brother in an attempt by the government to discourage social organisations. Ana Lucía Cuevas, Carlos' sister was, like them, a committed young person still studying, full of hope and ideals for a better life and equal

opportunities for the Guatemalan people. At the time of her brother's murder, she had already left the country in fear for her life. Today, she lives in Manchester, where she works as an artist, documentary maker and activist. She has dedicated her work to 'An Enduring Struggle for Justice in Guatemala', the title of one of her exhibitions. Her *oeuvre* includes filmmaking, sculpture, painting and drawing.

Politics of representation: 'The Echo of the Pain of the Many'

The discovery of the Guatemalan National Police Archive in an abandoned warehouse in 2005 triggered Ana Lucía's decision to return to Guatemala in order to find out and document what had happened to her brother. She narrates her journey in her feature documentary,' The Echo of the Pain of the Many '(2012), in which her family history is intrinsically linked to the history of Guatemala, covering more than mere autobiography and offering a deep insight into the causes and consequences of the civil war. Ana Lucía's documentary is considered a pioneer in tackling the theme of historical memory in Guatemala and a key documentary among those produced by Guatemalans (Grinberg Pla, 2016, p.259). The politics of representation of the tumultuous Cold War events in Central America during the 1980s were selective. They were documented, and fictionalised, by Hollywood in El Salvador and Nicaragua respectively: *Salvador* (Stone, 1999) and *Under Fire* (Spottiswoode, 1983). The Guatemalan narrative was mostly ignored by the international media, despite the horrors that occurred there. Numerous international documentaries were filmed in Guatemala in parallel with mainstream productions, one example being the US produced: *When the Mountains Tremble* by Yates and Sigel (1983). These were distributed independently to small audiences Estrada (2006), 'these documentaries, like testimonials, functioned as vital tools for consciousness-raising. Similarly, they were instrumental in urgently calling for political aid and action to solidarity groups in the U.S. and Europe.' The Guatemalan historian Boris Hernández, belonged to a group of activists, whom in 1985 exhibited in Guatemala for the first time *When the Mountains Tremble,* to social groups and syndicates with the aim to

spread the truth inside the country. Shortly after the screening Hernández needed to leave Guatemala (Ávila Pietrasanta in Gumucio, 2014, p.214).

The information network in Central America was carefully managed by the USA, and in the cases of Guatemala and El Salvador through their local governments (Chomsky, 1989, p.21). Hernández recounts that Guatemalans from different social sectors were interested in documenting this part of their history, but they were prevented from doing so by a Government decree banning press freedom and free expression of thought. Guatemalans were unable to inform others about blatant violations of Human Rights committed by the army, the National Police and paramilitary groups which were going unpunished (Miralles Terán, 2020). The information that circulated from and inside the country, although apparently free, was controlled by the government under US interference. In a telephone interview with Ana Lucía in April 2020, she explained that she was unaware of a massacre in the town of Chimaltenango, despite it being only 18 kilometres from her house. I asked whether she thought that Latin American politics and narratives were shaped by the Cold War. Her answer was adamant: 'That is what they (the USA government) want you to believe.' From her point of view, the social changes for which the young Guatemalans fought were not only necessary, but legitimate in their own right, and the Cold War was not a cause.

Her testimony adds to that provided via email, by Boris Hernández in May 2020: 'For any foreigner who wanted to document this situation, there were no restrictions. In fact, they were allowed to film and take pictures inside deployments or army bases, or they could even be taken by helicopter to conflict zones to show them how the people were being repressed. Not even the Guatemalan news channels were allowed to inform the population in a more extensive way about what was happening in the country. The objective was to keep the population uninformed. Only the army bulletins could be broadcast, naturally with false data.' It was a foreign reporter, aware that Guatemalans were unable to document their own history, who provided 'Association Comunicarte' for communication, art and culture (loosely translated as 'To communicate with you') with their first

video-camera, which, since 1986, has worked to record and document the country's historical memory.

For her documentary *The Echo of the Pain of the Many* (2012), Ana Lucía interviewed at great length, public figures along with people from different social backgrounds, who were and who are involved in social movements and organisations for Human Rights; from intellectuals and academics, in Guatemala and the USA, to indigenous Maya survivors of massacres, whose voices she honours in her documentary (Grinberg Pla, 2016, p.63). Ana Lucía's extensive research enable her to create a website, often actualised with further information and links about her ongoing work on the recent history of Guatemala (http://www.elecodeldolor.com). Many of the Guatemalans who were involved in social movement's during the 1980's, are still working on saving and documenting this part of history, which they want to tell from their point of view, so it is not forgotten.

Documentary Ethnographic Film Methods: the subjective act of remembering.

To analyse the impact of memory and representation in documentary, I made contact with Ana Lucía, through a mutual friend, in November 2019, to invite her to participate in my research via a telephone conversation. I explained the purpose of the research and how the information would be documented and used, and we arrange dates for filming. I filmed at her house in Manchester for more than three days, in December 2019. In the documentary: *Lucía and Guatemala,* Ana Lucía reflects on personal details of her present life, her emigration, and her struggle to regain emotional control after years of trying to find the body of her brother and, most importantly, justice. My objective was to understand the process of memory through her own work and testimony, examining firstly: 'the subjective act of remembering'.

I stayed at Ana Lucía's home for three days for the ethnographic study and documentary shooting. On the first evening, we went through the working plan to make the most of my visit. We decided to follow a collaborative process and film the interviews in two different settings: 1. At her

workshop while working, in an informal way with natural light. 2. In her living room in a staged setting for a formal interview, professionally illuminated by her partner Fred Coker. A walk in the park near her house was also filmed to document part of her daily routine. The decision to film in two different settings enabled me to capture her private and public personas. Ana Lucía offered me a choice of languages in which to interview her. She is fluent in Spanish, English and French. I preferred to use our mother language, Spanish, in order to retain more spontaneity. I considered it easier to talk about personal feelings and personal experiences in a first language.

Private persona: The ethnographic research took place firstly as participant observation, in her ceramic workshop. There Ana Lucía introduced different figures that she creates in clay, each with its own story, like *Josefina* her Maya childhood nanny. These figures are based on real stories of people close to her and her family; or people she knew through years of social involvement; or she met while filming her documentary and anonymous people whose stories in the news have impacted her. Ana Lucía explained her creative process while working on a new piece, while reflecting on the history of Guatemala, and relating the piece to her life experiences past and present. She is able to reconstruct her memories through these ceramic figures, her art reflects her life.

Ana Lucía takes a piece of clay and begins to work, without a predetermined idea: "To tell the truth, when I begin to work, I don't plan my figures. I simply take a piece of clay and the figures come from the stories of my life." These figures arise spontaneously, from her hands and her memories, during the creative process in a 'subjective act of remembering', which does not follow a chronological order. The finished figures sitting in the workshop's shelves seem to look at us: some are individuals, while others are modelled in groups. Ana Lucía knows and narrates each figure's story: they are all Guatemalans like her. Her female figures represent women capable of supporting society and fighting for their rights. They are not interpreted as 'stereotypes of female attitude and femininity' as Pollock describes some art work produced by women, but they are their own selves. In Ana Lucia's work, women are represented as stronger than men.

Public persona: The interview took place in her living room. Lightning and camera placement were discussed and decided with Fred's assistance. He left us alone for the interview itself. The questions were precise and referred to actual events, following the format of a semi-structured interview. Ana Lucía prepared herself for this interview by wearing lipstick. I emphasised that we were going to revisit the past and some unpleasant memories. Ana Lucía presented her memories in what appeared a predetermined narrative, but evidently this had to do with the way the questions were set. Her answers were clear and detailed in relation to the questions posed. While editing the footage I realised, that she often answered my questions by enriching them with the phrase "some people want to know", or by referring to her brother's disappearance: "Some people ask themselves why instead of capturing or killing the political opposition, in many countries, instead of doing those things. They take the people and they 'disappear' them. They take them and you never know what happened to them. This method was often used during the war in Guatemala, and we, my family, were victims of it … Because if a family is not in possession of the body of the person who was killed, they cannot close the cycle of mourning that continues throughout their entire life."

In the formal setting professionally illuminated, I found that Ana Lucía was more tense. However, this was not the first time that she had been in front of a camera. On the contrary, she already had a broad experience as an activist and presenting her documentary, as well as participating in discussion panels. For that reason, I refrained from asking for family photographs or albums or other elements used in memory studies (Hirsch, 1996). Nevertheless, Ana Lucía was providing me with important information and explaining it in rigorous detail. The absence of family photographs and albums helped, in this particular case, to avoid the narrative that she was accustomed to telling in her documentary presentations and exhibitions.

In both scenarios, Ana Lucía set up the narrative, although in her workshop the narrative that she provided was more fluid and intimate, especially when she related her work to her life experiences, past and present. In some cases, the most valuable information emerged when I turned off the

camera. Both locations highlighted the differences between her private and public personas and her personal struggle to regain balance in her life while continuing to help her community.

A country's tragedy

The civil war was a tragedy that Guatemalans have not been able to overcome, despite the 1996 peace agreement between the URNG and the government, 'which set forth ambitious but attainable standards of democratisation' (Stanley and Holiday, 2002). The peace process began stagnating by 1999. Subsequent governments have been plagued by corruption and scandals, which have impeded complete **reparations**. If history needs to be recounted from a testimonial perspective, the divisive concepts about race and 'the other', which predominate in official narratives, cannot be repeated. The Bolivian Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, in her book *Ch'ixinakax utziwa: On practices an discourses of decolonization,* mentions Rosa her Aymara indigenous nurse, the woman who taught her to speak Aymara, and inspired her to delve into the many layers of Latin American *mestizo* identity, built by different cultures. Likewise, Ana Lucía remembers Josefina with love: she was the Maya woman who took care of her and her siblings during *la violencia.* "They were certain figures, mainly women, who came into our life. Along with the love and care that we received from our parents, divided between us six children and under those conditions. These women gave us love and protection. They gave us food. This is the relationship that I had with characters like Josefina in my childhood". Although both experiences are separated by temporal and geographical distance (Bolivia and Guatemala), they share a common narrative where indigenous women, in different circumstances, were fundamental to keep the social fabric together. Ana Lucía, like Rivera Cusicanqui, does not comply with the socially imposed stereotypes of *ladino/mestizo* and indigenous culture as opposites, as if they were separated by insurmountable barriers. Both are able to produce works that resonate in the collective social memory. In *The Echo of the Pain of the Many,* Ana Lucía is capable of relegating her own tragic experience to the background in order to amplify the voices of the indigenous victims of the civil war. As Ginberg Pla notes 'Her approach

resist [*sic*] displacing or appropriating indigenous voices, it also subverts the dominant narrative that privileges a *ladino* view of Guatemalan national identity' (2016, p.265). Nevertheless, attempting to define and understand the complex social relations of the Latin American society, according to Rivera Cusicanqui, needs a classificatory move to avoid the construction of new limpid binaries (2020, p. xv).

Conclusion

This research in progress contributes to the understanding of the impact of memory, through the testimonies of Young People of the Latin American Cold War, through the example case of Guatemalans who were young and politically active during the 1980s, and who therefore Not only did they suffer the impact of the civil war, but they were repressed, persecuted or in need of leaving the country. They have faced the repercussions of the war through their work, which despite the repression and the horrors they witnessed and experienced, have not discouraged them from continuing to contribute to society through the studies of memory, as artists, filmmakers, academics and archivists. Ana Lucía, Hernández, and Gaytán are able to articulate their own personal historical perspective and establish a narrative of the 1980s through their own experiences, which are not subordinate to a Cold War narrative, mostly written in Western studies. and portrayed by external media. Ana Lucía emphatically denies any influence of the polarized narrative of the Cold War on her ideals or work. The social demands that these young Guatemalans waged during the 1980s were necessary and legitimate. Their need to defend democracy and aspire to a better society, without racism, and equal rights for all should never have been used as an excuse to repress them and assassinate their families, under the excuse of a speech imposed by the Cold War. Documentary film has been shown to have a lasting impact on memory and memory studies. A powerful medium that can be used to understand and represent the world, remaining in memory and also creating memories, with the ability to change the perception not only of the viewer, but of those involved in the production process. The filming process of the documentary Lucía y Guatemala has opened up a

rich vein of information, which questions and challenges the narrative of the Cold War. Hence the importance of the testimonies of these Guatemalans who feel the need to continue fighting for justice and a better society.

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